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ABSTRACT

Librarians tend to view themselves as agents, advocates, or promoters of educational and cultural processes, and these functions are important: but rural librarians can and should play a broader role in the community, including a role in community development activities. As information specialists, librarians have access to critical resources for agencies, government officials, and community groups involved in decision making and problem solving on behalf of the community. It is important for librarians to stay informed of the community development activities in their areas and to offer relevant information (census data, research publications, audio video materials, newspapers, funding sources) rather than assume that community members necessarily know what resources are available. The rural librarian's position, a public and influential one, can be used in numerous ways to support and advocate community improvement. The library can feature displays on local history, industry, and other topics of local concern and can sponsor workshops on community issues; the librarian can serve on local government or agency advisory boards. Finally, the librarian should conduct needs assessments to find out what the rural community, with its growing population of urban to rural migrants, wants and expects from its library. (JH)

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COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: THE ROLE OF THE RURAL LIBRARIAN

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As you are well aware, our conference theme is "Public Awareness of Rural Library Services". In a conventional sense this usually translates, "How can we effectively communicate to the public our presence, activities and services". I want to push that concept a little further and suggest that public awareness is really a two-way process. Public awareness is not only you or your organization communicating out to the community; it is also the community communicating in to you and your organization. In other words, you as librarians must be aware of, and sensitive to, the needs and desires of the community.

I an not a librarian (so forgive me if I am wrong) but I sense that librarians tend to view themselves as agents, advocates or promoters of educational and cultural processes. These functions are important but I think librarians can and should play a broader role in the community. As librarians you are information specialists. You hold or have access to a critical recourse for agencies, government officials and community groups involved in community decision making processes. Unfortunately this linkage between librarians and persons working in community development is not always clearly understood or utilized. Although this address focuses on helping librarians understand community development and the librarian's role in this process, it is equally important that community development practitioners become more aware of

the resources that are available through the library. This latter issue is one we plan to address in a future conference.

In the next few minutes I would like to address three general areas. First, change in rural communities and the effect of that change on library services. Second, a definition of community development. And finally, a brief discussion of how librarians fit into the community development process.

Rural Change

A significant demographic change has been occuring in this country since the 1970 census. For the first time in the nation's history, more Americans are moving from metropolitan areas than are moving to them.* Between 1970 and 1975, for every 100 persons moving to metropolitan counties, 131 moved out. This was a reversal of previous trends. During the late 1960s for every 100 persons moving to metropolitan areas, 94 moved out.

Although many of the nonmetropolitan growth areas are adjacent to metropolitan counties, there are also unmistakable signs of population growth in much more remote rural areas.

This revival of rural population growth is also taking place in Pennsylvania. The rural population of Pennsylvania totals over three million people. That is larger than the rural population

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* As defined by the Bureau of Census, metropolitan refers to counties having one or more city with a population of 50,000 or more. Nonmetropolitan would be any county without a city of 50,000.

of any other state in the nation. Between 1970 and 1975 non-metropolitan counties in the state adjacent to urban counties grew by 3.3 percent. Those counties not adjacent to urban counties grew by only a little less--2.4 percent. As was the case with the national figures, this followed several decades of decline.

Now, what does this mean to those of you providing services in rural areas? Most analysts seem to agree that this trend of the 70s represents a major change in American's expectations--what they want from their careers and what they are willing to give up to get it. At one time, the general view of rural life was reflected by Senclair Lewis in Main Street when he called the small town existence: "dullness made God ... the contentment of the quiet dead". This is no longer the case (although I must add that some people think Lewis's observation still holds). Rural life has been modernized and with increased ease of mobility these areas are no longer isolated from more urban areas.

Another important consideration is the composition of these persons moving into rural areas. Although some of these new migrants are seeking a life out of Thoreau, part of what has been called the "back to the land movement", more typically these persons are looking for a life equal distance between the brutalities of the country and the brutalities of the city.

A survey conducted in 1974 found that 71 percent of Pennsylvania residents would prefer to live in small cities, villages or

open country-side if they could live anyplace they choose. This compares to 40 percent who actually live there. Further questioning, however, showed that most of these people wanted to be within commuting distance of a city with a population of at least 50,000. This reflects the view of Robert Frost when he wrote:

> Well, if I have to choose one or the other,
> I choose to be a plain New Hampshire farmer
> with an income in cash of say a thousand.
> (From say a publisher in New York City)

The people moving into these rural areas tend to be more highly educated than their native neighbors and they bring with them expectations that many of the services and conveniences to which they have become accustomed will be available in their new rural communities. Thus the service user, the consumer, and in your case the person using rural libraries is going to be more knowledgeable and have higher expectations about what should be provided than service users did in the past.

As librarians you should become aware of the changes within your service area and be prepared to provide the services people desire. Consider conducting a needs assessment to determine what services library users (and current non-users) desire. In any community service program we run the risk of determining need based on past use figures. This information is valuable but limits us to evaluating services currently provided, excluding a whole range of possibilities.

What Is Community Development?

Defining community development necessitates first defining

the term community. I suspect that most people think of a community as a group of people living within a limited geographic area. In community development this definition becomes too limiting; we think not only in terms of community as a limited geographic area but also in terms of community of interest. This places the focus of attention on the reasons for a community; on the specific fact that generates cohesion rather than on the general fact of its mere existence. Defining community in this manner permits working with either small or large groups with the longer range perspective that these activities will interconnect with the activities of other groups working for a community improvement.

We now come to the original question, "What is community development?" The terms community development, community resource development, community organization, community planning, and others are used to describe a variety of processes and situations that deal with the action of people in groups to bring about change. An equally long list could be made of the roles that are performed by individuals who attempt to influence these processes, whether as educators, planners, developers, activists or persuaders.

To reiterate, in its simplest definitional form, community development is the organized action of groups of people to bring about social or economic change. Basic to this process is participation by the people of the community, however, that community has

been defined. The emphasis is on public issues (common or shared interests) that grow out of individual interests and concerns.

The Librarian's Role in Community Development

With this very brief introduction to the field of community development I want to look at the librarian's role in this process.

First, as librarians you are information specialists. You may not have realized it but that particular role makes you an important resource in the community development process. One of the major tasks of the community development professional is to guide community groups and organizations through a systematic problem solving process.

This process involves a number of steps: (1) defining the problem, (2) determining the cause or causes of the problem, (3) examining alternative approaches, (4) assessing the consequences of each alternative approach, (5) selecting a solution, (6) implementing the chosen solution, and finally (7) evaluating the implemented solution.

In each one of these steps of the community problem solving process information is required to make intelligent decisions. Some types of information or resources that will usually be needed include: census data, research publications, audio video materials, newspapers, and listings of funding sources.

As librarians, try to stay informed of community development projects in your area. In the small rural communities that most

of you represent, you will often be acquainted with the people involved. If you are aware of resources that might be helpful, contact them if they don't come to the library for assistance. Don't assume that community members necessarily know what resources are available. It also means that you as the librarian will have to be familiar with the information you have available in your library, through university or college libraries, inter-library loan, industrial libraries, and so on.

A second area of involvement in community development that I see for librarians is becoming supporters or advocates for community improvement. Whether you like it or not, your role is a public one, and in that public role you can influence community members to become involved in community projects. This might be through displays on historic preservation; community history; local industry, employment, or vocational areas; or a specific community issue. Another way to become involved would be sponsoring workshops on such community issues. A final method might be serving on local government or agency advisory boards. This type of involvement would be an excellent way to become better acquainted with local needs and provide the resource expertise that you have.

A final area of community development in which I see librarians involved is the conducting of needs assessments. In any service profession it is often tempting to assume that we know what people need. There are several shortcomings to such an assumption,

however. First our perceptions may be inaccurate. There may be needs or wishes of which we are not aware. In determining needs internally we also tend to base our judgements on reaction to presently offered programs, i.e., a retrospective assessment. There may be services that could be provided that are not being considered. This becomes even more critical in program goal setting because it is based on what already exists rather than on what could exist.

As a very basic attempt at conducting a needs assessment I would suggest surveying community groups, organizations and agencies to determine what their needs are. If you have more energy, time and resources, survey the entire community.

Let me stress again the importance of involving people. You probably have a board of directors or advisory board, but attempt to get more people involved. On small projects establish a planning board. For example, if you are having a workshop for parents to help them choose childrens' literature, have some local parents participate in planning the program. This not only involves parents in setting up the type of program that would interest them; these parents will also become recruiters for the workshop because it is their program. As more programs are planned, don't fall back on this same committee. The more community people you get involved the broader your base of support.

In closing I would like to quote Josiah Royce. Royce beautifully summarizes the underlying philosophy of community development

and poetically captures what community development is about:

> I believe in the beloved community and the spirit which makes it beloved, and in the communion of all who are, in will and in deed, its members. I see no such community as yet, but nonetheless my rule of life is: Act so as to hasten its coming.